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## **Community Development as Competing Discourses – Using Poststructuralist Discourse Theory to Deconstruct UK Community Development Praxis**

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This paper is an introduction to the presentation I will give on the 17<sup>th</sup> of September 2013 about specific aspects of my PhD research. The overall aim of my PhD research is **to analyse how both local and national policies and strategies constitute and re-constitute competing discourses of community development praxis within the north east; and how these competing discourses create problematic subject positions for professionals, volunteers and local people who are working together in local community development projects. In addition, the relationships between these problematic subject positions and how they affect the ideological aims and objectives of both community development praxis, in general and each of the local community projects/groups, will also be analysed.** I am currently undertaking research with professionals, volunteers and local people who are involved in three community development projects in the north east of England.

The forthcoming presentation aims to demonstrate how I am operationalising post-structural discourse theory to deconstruct contemporary community development praxis in England under the Coalition government. As a result, this paper will focus on the current status of community development praxis within the UK and the rationale for selecting post-structural discourse theory. The basic tenants of Laclau & Mouffe's (1985) post-structural discourse theory and Hansen's (2006) post-structural discourse analysis will also be briefly discussed.

### ***Rationale for Research Topic and Selection of Post-Structuralist Discourse Theory (PDT)***

Within England at present, the principles and practice of community development are under a wide-scale, and arguably insidious, attack due both to the Coalition government's current economic strategy of austerity, which has resulted in wide scale public sector cuts, and the controversial ideology of both The Big Society and the Localism Act (2011). Although the Big Society has now, almost completely, disappeared from mainstream political rhetoric, some of its 'principles' are being developed through the Localism Act (2011), i.e. the promotion of asset transfers and social enterprise, the public sector cuts, and the Community Organisers programme which is currently being spearheaded by the umbrella organisation Locality. On the whole, it is clear that the Coalition government is currently rejecting the principles and practice of community development; especially the role and function of community development practitioners, as it advocates that communities, citizens

and volunteers can now, without community development support, utilise localised power and funding to build 'stronger', and more independent, communities (Chanan & Miller, 2010).

However, even within the economic climate of austerity, the Coalition government is still managing to fund the Community Organisers programme that is currently being spearheaded by Locality. In February 2011, *Locality*, an umbrella community organisation, won the contract to produce a programme that would train 5000 community workers based on the US community organising model founded by Saul Alinsky, but also influenced by the praxis of Paulo Freire, Clodomir Santos de Moraes and Robert Chambers. These 5000 trained 'community organisers', would be deployed to various public, private and third sector organisations to then 'peer educate' workers, volunteers and local people in the principles of community organising. The reality was that an initial group of 30 full-time senior community organisers were recruited in early-to-mid-2011 to participate in, and then deliver, the Community Organisers' training programme in ten kickstarter communities throughout England, with the four-year plan of eventually recruiting and training 500 full-time senior community organisers in total with 4500 part-time, voluntary, mid-level community organisers to work throughout the UK; which David Cameron has since called his "neighbourhood army" (Glaze, 2011). It is this change in focus from community development workers to this programme of community organisers and volunteers that has re-ignited a deeply embedded debate within community development praxis: whether community development is actually radical or reformist in practice, and which model of community development is actually the most "authentic" (Mayo, 1975; Popple, 1995; Banks, 2011; Bunyan, 2012).

Popple (1995) makes the distinction between pluralist/reformist/conservative theoretical approaches/models and those that are radical/socialist/Marxist, explaining that collective community action is the most 'radical', and authentic form of community work, especially if that radicalism is influenced by Marxism, Freire and Alinsky. Therefore, for Popple, community workers who are working under a community service and planning model; and, sometimes, a community development model, are not doing 'authentic' community work as they are not 'truly' facilitating the 'liberation' and 'empowerment' of local people. However, within community development there is also a considerably more subdued counterargument that the community practice most radical in rhetoric can actually be the most reformist and conservative in practice. Marris & Rein (1967; cited in Mayo, 1975) presented this conundrum a long time ago in their critical analysis of community organising groups in the US operating under a community action model and stated that: "So far from challenging established power... community action turned out to be merely another instrument of social services, essentially patronizing and conservative" (ibid, p.8).

Marris & Rein's fifty years old comment holds some striking relevance today when affiliated to the critical evaluation of the current UK Coalition government's 'adoption' of the model of community action/organising for the Community Organisers programme. Greg Galluzzo, at present the senior community organiser with the Gamaliel Foundation in Chicago, has stated

that, in his opinion, what the UK Coalition government is packaging as community organising and community action is not authentic: “We (the Gamaliel Foundation) have a very specific definition (of community organising). It is clearly different from what the UK government is talking about” (Galluzzo, 2011; cited in Little, 2011). Paul Bunyan – an academic and a previous long-standing community worker with *London Citizens* – also uses a very similar critique, but also reinforces the prevalent radical-reformist binary in community development by stating that “... a clear distinction needs to be made between an authentic community organising approach, recognisable in concrete terms by its impact on existing relations of power at a local and broader institutional level, and other community development approaches which do not deliver in the same terms” (2012, p.120).

However, it is my contention that it is the historical, socio-economic and political backdrop that community development praxis finds itself embedded within that hugely influences whether or not community development praxis can be either ‘radical’ or ‘reformist’ in character, not the model and theoretical underpinning that is being utilised. Pre-1968 community development was, overall, regarded as a state-run, reformist activity that had its roots in both social work and colonial development. I would argue that the ‘radical’ nature of community development practice was constituted by the 1968 French (which was also influenced by the US) political and economic crisis about the nature of social democracy and the future of the political left, to which British community development praxis re-constituted itself in conjunction with academic sociology in a re-evaluation of Marxism to test whether or not social and economic change could come “... largely from political and organisational pressures emerging from the grassroots” (Green & Chapman, 1992, p.248). This test was unquestionably interrupted by a number of factors (including local authority opposition and the rise of the ‘new’ social movements), but I would argue that its strongest opponent came from the rise in neo-liberalism and the ramifications that this had for the UK economy and political ideology. In addition, I would argue that the constructions and representations of both the community development practitioner and local people during this same time frame were problematic. Indeed, the community development practitioner – especially working under the ‘radical’ Marxist model – was an academic and/or a grassroots level community activist who were both sponsored by the state to produce social change in the respective communities, through the use of “... expert power of research and evaluation in order to make evidence-based and objective decisions regarding solutions to social problems” (Emejulu, 2010, p.81). Local people, I would argue, were not only labelled in individually pathological terms or, in Marxist stipulations, as a ‘class in itself’ that had to be converted – by academics and grassroots activists – into a ‘class for itself’, but could only be on the community development worker’s radar if they were white, working class males who were able to work. Therefore, although this timeframe is generally regarded as the embodiment of radical community development’s history within the UK, I would argue that both community development workers and local people were constructed in problematic terms and that it was the academically trained experts or local activists that were empowered, at the expense of local people, in the community development process.

This pattern is replicated – to contrasting extents – in community development praxis from before 1968 and to the present date. From 1945-1967 the community development practitioner (known then as the ‘social worker’) was commissioned by the state to ‘restore’ communities after WW2 and to practice “interventions to encourage community self-help and local support networks” (Goetschius, 1969; cited in Craig et al., 2011, p. 26). Therefore, communities were seen as under-developed and that the local people in these communities had been constructed as ‘the poor’ and who were deemed to lack self-help skills and the ability to construct local support networks on their own. As a result, it was the role of the community development practitioner/social worker to promote these self-help skills and build these local support networks on behalf of the local people which placed local people in a passive role in the community development process, not an active role which is a core component of community development principles. This is re-iterated from 1979-1990 as community development was, arguably, struggling to re-define itself in the wake of the arrival of neo-liberalism and the marketization of public services; but that the role of the community development practitioner was still being invested with agency at the expense of local people due to the fact that the community development practitioner was preoccupied with its own identity crisis within this time frame and hence more and more focussed on developing its own identity as a professional. As a result, local people – although they are no longer constituted as a homogenous mass (tied with class) due to the breakthrough of the ‘new’ social movements – were still constructed as passive and dependent on community development practitioners. These identity constructions of community development practitioners as active and local people as passive (and dependent on community development practitioners) continue, arguably, throughout Major’s reign, in addition to the Blair/Brown years.

Currently within the UK (especially England), the constructions and representations of both the community development practitioner and local people are still fully undetermined due to the fact that the constructions and representations of community development praxis itself is under contestation by the Coalition government, which is having a knock-on effect on the constructions and representations of both the community development practitioner and local people. Interestingly, a ‘new’ identity is being more actively constructed as an integral part of community development praxis during this timeframe, although its roots are visible – although not as directly – in previous time frames, i.e. the active citizen and the middle-class-do-gooder. The ‘new’ identity is that of the volunteer who is being constructed as having characteristics of both community development practitioners and local people (Volunteer Now, 2011). Similar to the ‘community’ and ‘community development’ focussed policies and strategies of the Thatcher, Major and Blair (and Brown) years, the Coalition’s policies and strategies related to both the Big Society and Localism generates a strong distinction between the ‘active’ and ‘non-active’ citizen, i.e. the volunteer who does ‘good’ in their community and ‘gets involved’, and those who do not. However, community development practitioners – in the Thatcher, Major, Blair and Brown years – were predominantly seen as “strategic carriers” of this vision of civil society (Craig et al., 2011, p.112); an ingredient which is crucially missing under the Coalition government. Despite this, some representations of community development practitioners at present are not being completely jettisoned but are in the process of being reconstructed in the mould of community organisers that are, in theory, committed to the values and principles of Paulo Freire, Saul Alinsky, Robert Chambers and Clodomir Santos de Moraes; as previously discussed, under

the Community Organisers' programme spearheaded by Locality. This reconstruction is under heavy contestation in regards to whether it enables active or passive local people due to the fact that it is still unclear what the key characteristics of the community organiser role are, and if this representation is/will be significantly different from community development workers; how community organisers and volunteers/active citizens differ; and if the volunteers/active citizens will actually add a beneficial element to community orientated practices or further contribute to constructing passive local people who become dependent on these processes.

As a result of these considerations, I would advocate that the UK (especially England) field of community development's fixation on delineating between community development models and, contentiously, further separating them according to radical or reformist characteristics is not only flawed but misguided, as it does not challenge that community development praxis reproduces problematic identity constructions for not only professionals and local people, but also volunteers, who are working together in localised community development projects; regardless of which model or theoretical perspective they are operating under. Perhaps in relation to such issues, I would argue that there has recently been a small-scale flurry of academic activity towards analysing community development as discourse to "understand how various discursive repertoires influence the available identities for practitioners and community groups taking part in community development activities" (Emejulu, 2010, p.v). Both McArdle & Mansfield (2012) and Sercombe et al., (2013) focus on different competing discourses of community development within the Scottish context, with the former authors differentiating between a modernist and postmodernist community development discourse, and concluding that community development practitioners – in their current form – are not adequately challenging existing concepts, structures and hierarchies of knowledge, advocating a turn to more 'radical' models of practice; and the latter authors differentiating between discourses of community education as a: (i) service, (ii) way of working, and (iii) profession, and that the latter discourse "... seems partly about reinvesting in the practitioner, reasserting the practice as a function of the identity and commitment of the practitioner as active subject" (ibid, p. 14).. However, I would argue that both authors are overly concerned with the discursive construction of the community development/education professional to the detriment of a thorough analysis of the discursive construction of local people within community projects in Scotland, a trait that I have already argued is prevalent throughout the community development field within the UK.

One community development academic who challenges this co-constituted positioning of the community development worker and local people is Emejulu (2010), who has analysed competing discourses of community development in both the US and the UK, between 1968 and 1992, to ascertain how both community development professionals and local people were being both constructed and represented in community development texts. Interestingly, Emejulu (2010) used post-structuralist discourse theory to achieve this, and concluded that the majority of community development discourses in the UK "... construct(s) suspect identities for professionals and local people" and that professionals continue to put local people under "patronising and undemocratic ideas, languages and practices" (ibid, p.221),

confirming the points already stated. To go further, Emejulu (2010) also stated that the 'normative assertion' that community development praxis will always promote what is 'best' for ordinary people – especially if community development praxis is operating under a 'radical' model of community development – “perhaps obscures more critical reflections on its language, ideas and social practices” (Emejulu, 2010, p.3). I would agree with this analysis, especially in the light of developments within UK community development since the election of the Coalition government in 2010 where, I would argue, they are creating a discourse of community development as ineffective and a facilitator of dependency culture, in addition to the portrayal of the community development practitioner as a relic of a bureaucratic public sector that needs to be replaced by local-led civic governance, i.e. active citizens and volunteers. This discourse is being co-constructed by already existing discourses by community development academics and practitioners which favour 'radical' community development models as it is using the language – but arguably not the true philosophy – of 'radical' theorists such as Freire, Alinsky and Santos de Morais.

Therefore, to truly ascertain whether or not the Coalition government's 'vision' of community organising is a truly empowering alternative to community development, it is important to analyse how the roles of community development professionals, volunteers / active citizens and local people are co-constituted through the policies and strategies related to localism and the Big Society. Like Emejulu (2010), I would advocate that using post-structuralist discourse theory to deconstruct the language, ideas and social practices of contemporary community development praxis would not only supersede the current, misguided fixation on the radical-reformist binary, but would actually tackle another fundamental, deep-rooted problem within community development praxis that has not, yet, been sufficiently dealt with, i.e. how discourses of community development construct problematic subject positions for those involved in community development projects. The specific strand of post-structuralist discourse theory I am advocating is that of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their seminal *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985) which is regarded as third generational discourse theory and heavily influenced by post-structural theorists such as Foucault and Derrida, in addition to Marxists such as Gramsci and Althusser, and the psychoanalyst Lacan. Their key theoretical stipulations are that: (i) discourses are relational systems of signification; (ii) **all** social practices are constituted by historically specific discourses; (iii) meaning is constructed through the logics of equivalence and difference; (iv) there is no 'centre' that acts as a totalising discursive closure; (v) that empty and floating signifiers can function as nodal points for a transient 'fixation' of meaning; (vi) discourses are constructed in and through **hegemonic struggles** which 'fix' a moral, political or intellectual authority through the articulation of meaning and identity; and, (vii) that the hegemonic articulation of meaning and identity is underpinned by the development of **social antagonism** “which includes the exclusion of a threatening Otherness that stabilizes the discursive system while, at the same time, preventing its ultimate closure” (Torfing, 2005, p.15).

A key stipulation for Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory is the distinction made between dominant and marginalised discourses and the process by which discourses

become dominant and others marginalised. Both dominant and marginalised discourses are "... a social and political construction, which establishes a system of relations between different objects and practices, while providing 'subject positions' with which social agents can identify" (Howarth, 2000, p.102). However, dominant discourses are products of 'hegemonic projects' whereby a social, economic and/or political construction "... weaves together different strands of discourse in an effort to dominate or structure a field of meaning, thus fixing the identities of objects and practices in a particular way" (ibid). For Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p.113), these strands are woven together through the practice of articulation which is "the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning". Laclau & Mouffe's conception of 'nodal points' has its foundations in Lacan's concept of 'points de capiton' that are "privileged signifiers that fix the meaning of a signifying chain" (ibid, p.112). Therefore, these nodal points act as one of several discursive 'centres' in a given discourse that "... tends to exercise a totalizing effect on contiguous positions such that they partially lose their floating character and become parts of the structured network of meaning. An example of how a nodal point works is, for instance, in communist ideology and related discourse where the signifier 'communism' is a nodal point that binds together other signifiers such as 'democracy', 'state', and 'freedom'; re-articulating and re-constituting them into new meanings different from those used in competing discourses (Žižek, 1989). Crucially, a nodal point does not have a meaning (signified) in itself but is, in the words of both Laclau (1996) and Žižek (1989) an empty signifier that only acquires meaning through its positioning relative to other signs. Indeed, Žižek (1989), arguably, goes further than Laclau (1996) and stipulates that 'democracy' itself is not only a nodal point but a floating signifier. Floating signifiers are signifiers – like nodal points - that can be swayed to represent different things, by competing discourses, as they have no 'fixed' meaning but that their meanings are constructed through its differential relations with the other signifiers that are found in a discursive formation. However, a floating signifier's fundamental difference from a nodal point is that it is difficult to crystallise a set meaning of a floating signifier even when it is locked into a discourse because a competing discourse can easily 'unlock it' due to its ease to be linked with conflicting signifiers to constitute contrasting discourses (Žižek, 1989; Laclau, 1996).

Therefore, for Žižek (1989), 'democracy' is both a nodal point and a floating signifier and its role is dependent on the competing discourses that are fighting for hegemonic articulation. As a nodal point, Žižek (1989, p.108) argues that "... the only way to define 'democracy' is to say that it contains all political movements and organizations which legitimize, designate themselves as 'democratic'" and that "(i)n other words, the only possible definition of an object in its identity is that this is the object which is always designated by the same signifier – tied to the same signifier" (ibid). Žižek (1989) then gives the example of the difference between a liberal-individualistic notion of democracy and that of the socialist/democratic socialism which are both defined by contrasting floating signifiers, including the same signifier of 'democracy' for each discourse, that have been weaved through the nodal point (in this case, both socialism and capitalism/liberalism) into chains of equivalence "... which 'gives meaning' to all the others and thus totalizes the field of (ideological) meaning" (ibid, p.110). Crucially though, Žižek (1989, p. 109, emphasis added) states that even when the weaving of the floating signifier of 'democracy' has been successful in each discourse to determine their contrasting signifieds (i.e. meanings), "... 'democracy' is defined **not** by the



positive content of this notion (its signified) **but only by its positional-relational identity** – by its opposition, its differential relation to ‘non-democratic’”.

From this example, I would similarly argue that ‘community development’ is, in itself, both a floating signifier and a nodal point that is used in a wide variety of social, economic and political discourses. However, whether or not it can, as a nodal point, crystallise its meaning – and that of its co-constituting floating signifiers - for an extended duration of time is dependent on the socio-economic and political climate at that particular time. For example, in times of social, political and economic consensus or stability, community development could be used more as a nodal point than a floating signifier due to the fact that its meaning would have been recently crystallised in a variety of dominant – and arguably reasonably complementary – discourses and, as a result, could be used as a nodal point in the construction of other like-minded discourses to totalise the ideological field/discursive formation. However, in times of social, political and economic upheaval, i.e. economic crises, change of governance, war, etc, I would argue that community development could not be used as effectively as a nodal point and hence could be used more effectively as a floating signifier which, for example, could form chains with other floating signifiers, for example, such as: ‘progression’, ‘democracy’, ‘social justice’, ‘participation’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘social inclusion’, but that ‘community development’ as a signifier would need the ‘flavour’ of a specific socio-economic or political ideology to constitute its signified/meaning. Examples of such socio-economic or political ideologies that could be used as nodal points to differently flavour community development could be: national security, nationalism, neo-liberalism, and social democracy. If the nodal point of neo-liberalism was used to weave in ‘community development’, I would argue that examples of the floating signifiers it would most likely become tied to would be: ‘self-help’, ‘enterprise’, ‘voluntarism’ and ‘best practice’. Conversely, if ‘community development’ was weaved into the nodal point of ‘social democracy’, I would argue that the floating signifiers it would most likely be tied to would be: ‘equality’, ‘social justice’, ‘participation’, and ‘empowerment’. However, I would also argue that it is clear from both these examples that each of the nodal points could incorporate floating signifiers from either chain and that this would suspend the hegemonic articulation of a dominant discourse. Therefore, it is – as Žižek (1989) stipulated – absolutely crucial that both nodal points are held in place by their opposing nodal points and their opposing signifiers, i.e. the opposing nodal point to ‘neo-liberalism’ would likely be ‘socialist/cooperative’ and the signifiers of ‘self-help’, ‘enterprise’, ‘voluntarism’ and ‘best practice’ could be held in place by, for example, ‘cooperation’, ‘community cooperatives’, ‘altruism’ and ‘person-centered’, for example; but I would argue that they would most likely be positioned against: ‘apathy’, ‘unproductive’, ‘not-giving’ and ‘professional mismanagement’ to truly hold the hegemonic articulation.

Indeed, Žižek (1989) was elaborating on Laclau & Mouffe’s (1985) work as the latter stated in their original work that this process of linking together these floating signifiers to nodal points is called ‘a chain of equivalence’ which can **only** take place when located in relation to its opposing nodal point to hold it in place, i.e. that the nodal point of socialism is held in place by its opposing nodal point of capitalism. This chain of equivalence ensures that the

meaning of these floating signifiers holding together the nodal point are “... transformed by their overlapping identifications with partially shared sets of beliefs” (Smith, 1998, p.89) and, as a result, “(e)very subject position bears the residual traces of past articulations, and is always being articulated into many different chains of equivalence at the same time” (ibid). The opposing nodal point also holds its floating signifiers in place through chains of equivalence and it is the antagonistic relation between these two co-constitutive chains of equivalence that is called the ‘logic of equivalence’ which serves to dissolve the boundaries/frontiers between social groups or different interests by “relating them to a common project and by establishing a frontier to define the forces to be opposed, the ‘enemy’” (Mouffe, 1993, p.50; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Therefore, the construction of an identity (or a subject position) is through its relational position to others and that explicit policy representations of a single identity or subject position (Self) also implicitly represent the other identities or subjects (Other(s)) that the single identity or subject position is relationally positioned against.

As a result, I have decided to use post-structuralist discourse theory (PDT) to deconstruct contemporary community development praxis under the Coalition government as I believe that PDT has much to offer the field of community development; in not only surpassing its unhelpful radical-reformist fixation but also in demonstrating how differing community development discourses construct their own problematic identity practices between professionals, volunteers and local people who are working together in local community development projects. This research is split into three separate parts: (i) a post-structuralist analysis of national policies and local strategies that are influencing community projects and constructing identity roles for community development professionals, volunteers and local people; (ii) a life history interview with professionals, volunteers and local people involved in community projects to be analysed using post-structuralist discourse analysis to construct an identity web of binaries; and, (iii) a follow-up interview in April/May 2014 with the professionals, volunteers and local people to chart how/if their identity webs of binaries have changed and explore how these changes may have occurred.

As a result, my forthcoming presentation will focus on my methodology and demonstrate: (i) how I am constructing identity webs of binaries - using Laclau & Mouffe’s (1985) post-structuralist discourse theory – for community development professionals, volunteers and local people in three community development projects within the north east; (ii) how these identity webs of binaries can be used, inter-relationally, to demonstrate how certain people (both within and out-with) are ‘included’ or ‘excluded’ (‘othering’) from the community development projects; and, (iii) how Hansen’s (2006) post-structuralist discourse analysis can determine which are the dominant and marginalised discourses of community development that are being constituted by the Coalition government and how these are possibly impacting on each of the local community development projects I am undertaking my research with.

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